

# THE RANCH AT THE WOLVERINE

A tale of the wild outdoor life of pioneer days that called forth all the courage and resourcefulness of men and women inured to danger and hardship

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### Billy Louise Gets a Surprise.

Billy Louise, worried, sick at heart because her crowding doubts and suspicions had suddenly developed into black certainty just when she had thought them dead forever, Billy Louise rode up the narrow, rocky gorge. She had come to have a vague comprehension of the temptation Ward must have felt. She had come to accept pityingly the possibility that the number of old influences had eaten more deeply than appeared on the surface. She had set herself stanchly beside him as his friend, and would help him win back his self-respect. She felt sure that he must suffer terribly with that keen, analytical mind of his, when he stopped to think at all. He had no warped ethics where truth was concerned. She knew his ideas of right and wrong were as uncompromising as her own, and if he stole cattle, he did it with his eyes wide open to the wrong he was doing. And yet—

"That's all right, but to try and fasten evidence on some one else," Billy Louise grunted her answer to the treachery of it. She believed he had done that very thing. How could she help it? She had seen the coral and had seen Ward ride away from it in the dusk of the evening; or she believed she had seen him, which was the same thing. And she knew what lay behind him. Was his version of the past after all the correct and the right? Might not the paragraph she had burned be nothing more than the truth?

Billy Louise fought for him; fought with her stern, youthful judgment which was so uncompromising. It takes years of close contact with life to give one a sure understanding of human weakness and human endeavor.

At the ford, when Billy Louise crossed and tumbled the trail home, Billy Louise reined him impulsively the other way. Until that instant she had not intended to seek Ward, but once her fingers had touched the reins against his neck, she did not hesitate; she did not even argue with herself. She just turned the horse, saw that it was not yet noon—so much as happen to her two or three hours—and sent Billy up the hill at alope.

She did not know what she would do or what she would say when she saw Ward.

The two mares fed dispiritedly at the lowest corner of the field, their hair rough with exposure to the winter winds and the storms, their ribs showing. With all the hay he had put up, Ward might at least keep his horses in better shape, Billy Louise censured, as she passed them by.

Further along, Billy Louise heard a welcoming nicker and turned her head. Here came Ratter, the smallest, the roughest, the most unattractive of the bunch, trotting down a shallow gulley to meet Billy. The two horses clattered together whenever Ward was at the Wolverine. Billy Louise pulled up and waited till Ratter reached her. He and Blue rubbed noses, and Blue shook his ears and shook his head with teeth bared, in playful pretense of anger. Ratter kicked up his heels in disdain at the threat and trotted alongside them.

Billy Louise rode with puckered eyes. Ward might neglect his stock, but he would never neglect Ratter like this. And he must be at home, since here was his horse. Or else—

She struck Blue suddenly with her reins and went clattering up the trail where the same hay had not yet been trampled with dirt. The trail was untracked save by the loose stock. Where was Ward? What had happened to him? She looked again at Ratter. There was no sign of recent saddle marks along his side, no telltale imprint of the cinch under his belly. Where was Ward?

Blind, unreasoning terror filled Billy Louise. She struck Blue again and plunged into the lay creek creek and near the stable. She stopped there just long enough to see how empty and desolate it was, and how the horses and cattle had huddled against its sheltering wall out of the biting winds; and how the door was shut and fastened against the cold, and how she opened it and looked in, and shut it again. Then she turned and ran, white-faced, to the cabin.

Where was Ward? What had happened to him? Billy Louise saw the doorstep banked over with old, crusted snow. Her heart gave a jump and stopped. She felt her knees shake under her. Her face seemed to pinch together, the flesh clinging close to the bones. Her whole being seemed to contract with the deadly fear that gripped her. It was like that chill morning when she had crept out of her room over to mummy's bed and had lifted mummy's head that was hanging down—

She came to herself; she was running up the creek, away from the cabin. Running and stumbling over rocks, and getting tripped up by her riding skirt. She stopped, as soon as she realized what she was doing; she stopped and stood with her hands pressed hard against each side of her face, forcing herself to calm down—

looked into Ward's fever-wild eyes. He was sitting up in the bunk, and he was pointing his big forty-five at her. "Get up from there!" he ordered sternly. "Don't try any game, like that one, Buck Oney! Get up and go over and sit in that chair. I've got a few things to say to you."

Billy Louise somehow grasped the truth, up to a certain point. Ward was sick; so sick he didn't know her. She thought she would better know him. She got up and went and sat in the chair as he directed.

Ward, keeping the gun pointing her way, sneezed at her a few times, and made the soul of Billy Louise cringe. She faced him big-eyed, too amazed at the change in him to feel any fear that he would harm her. He had whistled two inches long. She wouldn't have known him except for his hair—and that was terribly tousled; and his eyes, though they were wild and angry, his voice was hoarse, and while he glared at her, he coughed with a hard, cough resonance.

"So you came back, did you?" he asked grimly at last. "Well, you didn't get a chance to plug me in the back. How long did you lay up there on the bluff this time, waiting to catch me? I'd left that rope so it would have hung you, you see?"

"I suppose you and Foxy and that half-bred have been fixing up some more evidence, huh? You figure that I can't catch 'em this time and work the brands over, so they'll stand 'em, and I'll get railroaded to the pen. Well, you've overplayed your hand, old timer. I let you fellows down easy, last time. I don't reckon Foxy objected much to those few I turned back to him, and I don't reckon you did any kicking when you found I'd cut the rope so it wouldn't hold your rotten necks. You can't let well enough alone, though. You thought you'd raise me, did you? You thought you'd come back and try another whack at me behind my back. You knew I'd hang you. I wasn't the kind of man that would jump the country. You know you'd find me right here, attending to my business like I've always done."

"But you've overplayed your hand. This time I'm going to get you—and Foxy and that half-bred along with you. It was a rotten trick, running 'em over Seaback's brand. If I hadn't caught you in the act, you'd have planted them cattle where all I—I couldn't have saved me when they were found. If I hadn't caught you, you'd run 'em all over the country. I'd have been up against it for fair. So now you're going to get what's coming to you. I won't take any chances on your not trying it again. I'm going to protect myself right."

"You throw that gun on the bed," (Billy Louise did so, her eyes still upon Ward's flushed face.) "Now, get down that tablet from the shelf. Here's a pencil." He drew one from under his pillow and tossed it toward her. "Now you write the truth about all this rustling. It's a bigger thing than shows right in this neighborhood. I know that. And I know, too, that Foxy has been pulling down some on the side. He never pulled for all the stock that's run around you and me. Pretty smooth trick, too; a heap better than working brands. He ought to have been satisfied with that—but a crook never is satisfied. I knew he wasn't the tenderfoot he tried to make out, and when I saw some of his stock and that gate fixed to ring a bell when it was opened, I knew he was a crook. But he made a big mistake when he threw in with you, you—"

"You throw that gun on the bed," the truth about that Harpud deal; who was in with you. I know, all right, but I want it down on paper. And I want to know how long Foxy's been in with you. 'Now you write the truth about the outside. Get busy; write it all down. I'll give you all the time you need; don't leave out anything. Dates and all, I want the whole facts. Don't try to get away. I've got this gun

constantly quick gripping of it again, if the whim seized him. Still—surely to goodness, Ward would never get crazy enough to hurt her! Perhaps her frenzy of assurance, her hold on him, more than her courage, kept her nerves fairly steady. She bit the pencil absently, watching him.

Ward turned his head restlessly on the pillow and coughed again. Billy Louise got up quietly, went close to the bed, and laid her hand on his forehead. His head was hot, and the veins were swollen and throbbing on his temples.

"Give Buckaroo a headache?" she queried softly, stroking his temples soothingly. "Got the hookin' cough, too. Got every meanie he can think of. Even got a grouse against the Flower of the Ranch—eh?" Her voice was croakily soft and sweet, as if she were murmuring over a sleepy baby.

Ward closed his eyes, opened them, and looked up into her face. One hand came up to his forehead and he rubbed it. "Wilhelmina!" he said, in his hoarse voice. His eyes cleared to sanity under her touch.

Billy Louise drew a small sigh of relief and reached unobtrusively with her free hand for the gun. She slid it down away from his fingers, and when he still paid no attention, she picked it up quite openly and laid it against the footboard.

"You've been a good deal of time occupied with the amazing reality of her presence."

"You've got a terrible cold; and from the looks of things, you've had it for six months!" said the only one—Bh. Ward, it isn't!" She knelt and curved an arm around his face and kissed him again and yet again. "I do love you, Ward. I've been a weak-kneed, horrid thing, and I'm ashamed to the middle of my bones. You're my own brave buckaroo always—always! You've done what no other man would do, and you don't whine about it; and I've been weak and—horrid; and I'll have to love you about a million years before I can quit feeling ashamed."

She kissed him again, with a passion of remorse for her doubts of him.

"Are you through being pals, Wilhelmina?" Ward broke rules and freed an arm, so that he could hold her closer.

"Now, I'm just beginning. Just beginning right. I'm your pal for keeps. But—"

"I love you for keeps, lady mine!" Ward stilled another cough. "When are you going to—marry me?"

"Oh, when you get over the hookin' cough, I'll do it. You're my own brave buckaroo always—always! You've done what no other man would do, and you don't whine about it; and I've been weak and—horrid; and I'll have to love you about a million years before I can quit feeling ashamed."

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## HOW THIS NERVOUS WOMAN GOT WELL

Told by Herself. Her Sincerity Should Convince Others.

Christopher, Ill.—"For four years I suffered from irregularities, nervousness, and a bad condition. Two of our best doctors failed to do me any good. I heard so much about what Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound had done for others, I tried it and was cured. I am no longer nervous, am regular, and in excellent health. I believe the Compound will cure any female trouble."—Mrs. ALICE HILLEN, Christopher, Ill.

Nervousness is often a symptom of weakness or some functional derangement, which may be overcome by this famous root and herb remedy, Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, as thousands of women have found by experience.

If complications exist, write Lydia E. Pinkham Medicine Co., Lynn, Mass., for suggestions in regard to your ailment. The result of its long experience is at your service.

Make The Laundry Happy

Red Cross Ball Blue will enable the laundress to produce fine, fresh-looking pure white clothes instead of the greasy yellow usually obtained. RED CROSS BALL BLUE always produces.

5 cents.

At all up-to-date grocers.

ABSORBINE

will reduce inflamed, swollen joints, sprains, bruises, soft corns, bunions, hemorrhoids, etc. It is a positive antiseptic and germicide. Pleasant to use, does not blister or burn. 25¢ per bottle. 50¢ per bottle. Book 7 free.

Itching Rashes Soothed With Cuticura

WHEN YOU THINK FLAHS Think of Factory Price

TO CAMOUFLAGE A HOME

Just a Few Simple Suggestions That May or May Not Be Exactly Followed.

Monotonous Selections.

"What on earth is the matter with this piano?"

Every Time I Eat POST TOASTIES

Dad says—'Eat 'em up Bob You're saving wheat for the boys in France'

Watch Young Chickens.

Increases Carrying Capacity.

## PIG CLUBS HAVE CAUSED BIG INCREASE IN DEMAND FOR REGISTERED BREEDERS



Purebred Pigs Raised by Pig Club Members Being Judged at a State Fair.

(Prepared by the United States Department of Agriculture.)

In some sections of the country the need for better breeding stock was outstanding when the United States Department of Agriculture began its boys and girls pig club work.

In such cases the pig-club agents have practically insisted that only purebred pigs could be used in the breeding projects. This necessitated the importing of registered pigs of both sexes. The results of the demonstrations made by members handling these pigs under instruction from the pig-club leaders have caused a great demand for pigs "just like Sonny's".</